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LBI BEACH PROJECT

A realistic strategy

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Surf City Mayor Leonard Connors recently showed a realistic determination to securing a Long Beach Island beach protection project: He said eminent domain would be used to comply with government conditions to funding the project.

The federal government has agreed to fund most of a \$70 million project to widen and protect 17 miles of island beach. The government demands that homeowners grant easements allowing the Army Corps of Engineers to work on sections of the beach that they privately own.

But only a small percentage of property owners have signed easement agreements because the state Department of Environmental Protection is demanding the public have access to that beach property. The DEP is also insisting that beach entry points be established every quarter-mile and that towns provide parking areas and public restrooms.

Those are realistic demands: State and federal taxpayers are the ones picking up most of the tab, and they're not picking it up to maintain someone's private beach. Public access â€” including the necessary parking and amenities â€” must be assured before public funds are used.

Connors, who is also a state senator, said eminent domain would likely be used to allow the beach work to be done if homeowners refuse to grant the easements.

This is the exactly kind of public purpose for which eminent domain should be reserved (and note that no one's home would be taken here). Connors remembers the March 1962 storm that devastated large parts of Long Beach Island. He said the project would also help protect western parts of the island.

Too much depends on this project to risk losing federal funds. Tourism is the state's second-biggest industry, generating \$30 billion a year in revenue and \$2 billion in state taxes.

The easement and access issues will not be easily settled. There are significant disagreements. Connors believes the state should be the government entity to condemn the property and pay costs associated with increasing beach access for all of New Jersey. Others think it's fair for municipalities to bear those costs in return for tens of millions of dollars in public money.

For too long, the public has been prevented from getting to the ocean through a lack of parking availability or even a path to the beach, particularly in the North Beach and Loveladies sections of Long Beach Township. However the issues unfold, Connors injected a welcome dose of reality in asserting that eminent domain will be used if necessary to prevent some homeowners from derailing a needed project.

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